

The Stephen Dwoskin dossier: introduction

Article

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Introduction

Amid the current interest in 1970s independent and underground film culture amongst film historians and artists, a re-evaluation of the work and impact of the late Stephen Dwoskin is timely ¹. He was a key motivating force in the development of experimental film in the UK and in the building of its infrastructure. Practicing at a time when the field was just forming, Dwoskin inhabited a key position as a film-maker and teacher. His arrival from the US, as often recounted, was through a Fulbright scholarship as a Graphic Designer in 1964 and Dwoskin has an impressive CV in this field as well as in film. He taught Graphic Design at the London College of Printing (now LCC) and later became Professor of Film at the RCA alongside Peter Gidal until the Department was closed down in the 1980s. Dwoskin is probably most remembered in the UK as co-founder of the London Film Maker's Co-Op and writer of the book *Film Is...*, although these were only two amongst his many passions and projects that involved generating communities in art. For example he co-founded and later campaigned against the closure of the Other Cinema, he was active in disability rights and he taught at alternative educational set ups such as the Anti University in the 1970s. Alongside these other concerns his film production output was both prodigious and heterogeneous: by the time of his death in 2012 he had made over 50 films. Even as he died in London in the early hours of 28th June, Tatia Shaburishvili was busy editing the sound his last film, *Age Is...* (2012), posthumously premiered at Locarno. He died as he'd lived, pushing beyond his limitations to the end. Uniquely, Dwoskin's films spanned the spectrum of possibilities from personal experimental work to documentaries and feature films such as *Behindert* (1974) and *Dyn Amo* (1976) notably commissioned by the German TV company ZDF as well Channel 4 and the BFI. His best-known works in the UK and those most often screened are the early, underground-inspired movies from the late 1960s (although at the time he didn't like the term, later on he embraced it): works such as *Alone* (1963), *Chinese Checkers* (1964) or *Dirty* (1965). The films made from the mid 1990s onwards became more introspective and were made on digital video at his home in Brixton, where he relied on friends and small grants to complete them. These works such as *Night*

Shots (2006) or *Oblivion* (2005), were powerful and challenging. They represented a return to his long-standing interest in Bataille and Alfred Jarry, dealing with embodied affects such as claustrophobia, abjection and desire. Other later works are poignant or funny such as *Some Friends (apart)* (2002) or *Grandpère's Pear* (2003) that belong more to an expanded documentary tradition where Dwoskin would distort, slow and stretch the image to emphasise a fleeting moment of expression. These later works in particular have not been given much exposure or critical attention in the Anglophone world² although they are much celebrated on the continent for their cinematic innovation, particularly in France where Dwoskin's work has been championed by such writers such as Raymond Bellour, Frances Alberra and Nicole Brenez and included in film journals such as *Dérives*³ and *Trafic*⁴ as well as the publication, *Inside Out: Le Cinema de Stephen Dwoskin*.⁵

The University of Reading has recently acquired the Stephen Dwoskin archive, comprising Dwoskin's own collection of books, ephemera, photographs and papers that contributed to the making of his oeuvre and collated from his home in Brixton. This dossier is essentially a first statement that forms part of a larger reassessment of Dwoskin that the archive will afford⁶. The writers here derive from a younger generation of scholars and curators who aim to make sense of the late 20th Century as history, as distinct from the previous generation, including Dwoskin, who wrote to secure their ideological interests for the discipline and their own impact within it. These younger writers focus on the productive difficulty that Dwoskin's work poses to film theory and criticism from a range of viewpoints, repositioning Dwoskin as both a formal and political innovator; as a counter to the 'Two Avant Gardes'; as a maker of communities through collaboration. In sum, Dwoskin is positioned here as a figure who effectively defies categorization.

Adrian Martin offers a light footed overview of Dwoskin's oeuvre through the idea of collaboration and the essay, "collaborative collage", comparing his work to that of Chris Marker and theorizing through Raul Ruiz notions of the tension between the centrifugal and the centripetal drives of film: the former towards

unity the latter towards fragmentation, of which Dwoskin's *Trying To Kiss the Moon* (1994) is an exemplar. Through this form he opens up the film not only to the "idea of otherness" but "to the concrete traces and effects of this otherness, transforming his own style in the process". Lucy Reynolds also picks up on Dwoskin's motivation towards depicting otherness, explaining it through his own bodily otherness. She discusses the impetus to make the work *Ballet Black* (1986) as a politically motivated intervention that invokes a "rare moment of multicultural accord" in a period of racial conflict, but also takes on the relationship between cinema and history through the dancing body by filming re-enactments and rehearsals of the original Ballet Negres productions by the *Ballet Black* actors and dancers. Reynolds argues that Dwoskin thus uses formal innovation to collapse contrasting moments of race relations as a political critique. Henry K. Miller takes the friendship between Dwoskin and Raymond Durgnat to delineate the convergence and discrepancies between the interests of these singular figures, particularly in relation to the issue of desire, a preoccupation of both. Miller describes the engagement Dwoskin had with desire in film and the way in which, according to Dwoskin, film is able to cross the barrier between seeing, experiencing and relating. Dan Kidner takes a historiographic look at the discursive construction of avant-garde film in the 1970s, exploring the divergence between Dwoskin's inclusive and personal vision of independent film culture and Peter Wollen's schematic polemic, 'The Two Avant-Gardes'. Kidner argues that Dwoskin defies categorization according to the antinomies that structure Wollen's essay and pre-empt Wollen's call for new, politically engaged and formally challenging film-making. This dossier commemorates a significant figure in British film culture and points to the research possibilities opened up by the establishment of the archive, but above all, it is intended to inaugurate the reassessment of a singular avant-garde artist and filmmaker.

¹ *A History of Experimental Film of 1970s: Britain's Decade of Diversity*, Patti Gaal-Holmes (London: Palgrave, 2015); Raven Row project of exhibiting artists from

1970s; “Now That’s What I Call Pluralism”, symposium organized by Film and Video Study Collection, Central St Martins School of Art, March 19 2015.

² A few notable exceptions to this are Adrian Martin, included in this dossier and Will Fowler of the BFI.

³ <http://www.derives.tv>

⁴ Revue *Trafic*, collectif, 76, Winter 2010, POL Editeur.

⁵ Ed. Antoine Barraud, Independencia Editions, 2013. Barraud was also one of the producers of *Age Is...* through *House on Fire Productions*.

⁶ The Dwoskin Archive was inaugurated as part of the University of Reading’s Special Collections at a symposium at the ICA, 3 March 2013. Two of the papers in this dossier were presented as earlier forms at this symposium organized by Dr R. S. Garfield.